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## Comments on Adhikari and Mathe

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Adhikari and Mathe's paper is a model of engaged intellectual production: it provides a sustained and informed forensic analysis of issues of the highest importance and most immediate relevance. There are two main themes. The first, and less satisfactory, theme concerns the power and irresponsibility of the Western media, particularly CNN and the BBC. The second, and more convincing, theme has to do with the unanswered questions and doubts that remain about the course of events in the Royal Palace on June 1<sup>st</sup> 2001, events whose impact on the Nepali nation can truly be described by those overworked terms 'traumatic' and 'tragic'.

The Western mass media can certainly be accused of ignorance and of trivialization (one particularly poor article I saw mentioned the 'king as Vishnu' trope about half a dozen times), but to accuse them of overweening power, seems paradoxical. If the Western reporting shows anything, it is the *failure* of the West to convince non-Western people of its point of view. After all, most Nepalis, as far as one can tell on an impressionistic and anecdotal basis, do not accept the official line that Dipendra was responsible for the killings. It was precisely the failure of authoritarian governments in the USSR and eastern Europe to control the flow of information that was one of the key elements in the collapse of communism in those countries. The Western media has singularly failed to convince most Nepalis of the line that their own official enquiry has taken. Nepalis have come to their own conclusions. In the jargon of Anglophone social science, Adhikari and Mathe, by ascribing overwhelming power to the Western media, have 'denied agency' to ordinary Nepalis.

Adhikari and Mathe acknowledge that global news is a 'free for all' and complain that one version of events was propagated to the exclusion of all others. They state that "there is no provision for authoritative information providers and their responsible editors to confirm and challenge the news before dissemination" (p.48). Yet they also assert that the news has been "manipulated from day 1" (p.53). Who has been doing the manipulating? Was there a plot? If there is a

coherent alternative version, investigative journalists need to provide it.

Over-emphasis on the power and the failings of the Western media draws attention away from the other main, and more important, issue: Just what did happen in the palace on June 1<sup>st</sup>? Adhikari and Mathe rightly draw attention to many questions that remain unanswered, to which it would be good to have answers before too long. Some are more serious than others: the question of whether or not Dipendra had numerous bullet wounds in his back strikes me as particularly important. The new government ought perhaps to appoint a second, long-term commission to follow up the investigations of the first.

Adhikari and Mathe say, "alternative theories were not considered". If there are coherent alternative theories that fit the available evidence and face fewer unanswered questions, it is for Nepalis to put them forward. So far, the public, both in Nepal and in the wider world, is faced with the choice of believing the official account, which has, as they point out, some holes in it, but is at least afloat. Or, the public can choose to believe rumours or emotional responses that have only narrative plausibility to recommend them, but no evidence. It is a basic rule of epistemology that unless there is an alternative, more encompassing theory, one has no choice but to go with the existing theory, unsatisfactory though it may be. For the moment, the official account is the only one that has independent confirmation from sources within the palace.

The American sociologist, W.I. Thomas, is supposed to have said, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Does it matter if most of the Nepali population believes that the 1<sup>st</sup> June incident was a coup d'état? For the older generation and for uneducated rural people, the king is the king, however he acquires the throne. However, education is one area where Nepalese modernisation has been a success story. Nepal's increasingly educated population is likely to take a different view. Monarchies only survive into the modern era if the monarch acts, and is seen to act, within and under the law. Before June 1<sup>st</sup>, parliamentary democracy in Nepal already faced a severe crisis of legitimacy. Whether constitutional monarchy can survive this shock to the symbolic heart of the system, remains to be seen.